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# Reading Group Gold

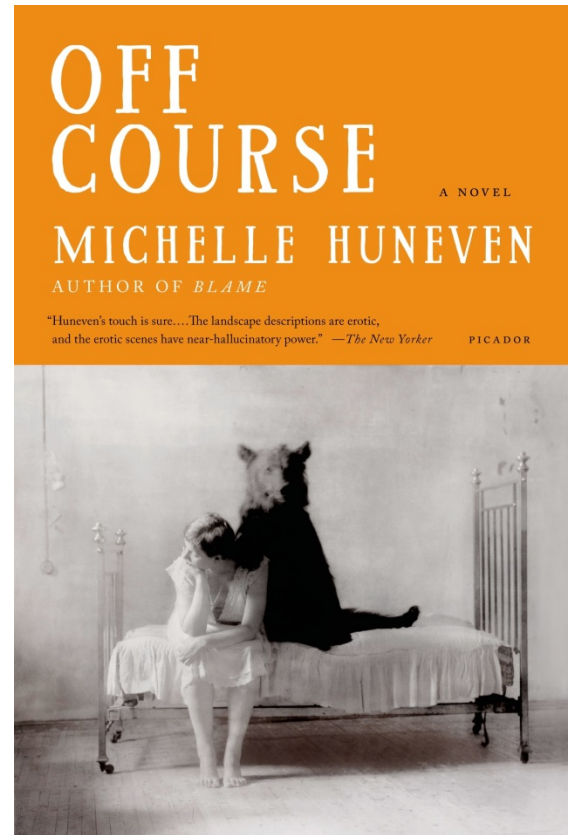
## Off Course: A Novel

By Michelle Huneven

"Skillful and perceptive . . . A complex portrait of a woman under the influence: of love, then obsession."—*The New York Times Book Review* (Editors' Choice)

The year is 1981. The United States has just installed Ronald Reagan in the White House, and Cressida Hartley, a Ph.D. candidate in economics, has relocated to her parents' A-frame in the Sierras. There, she plans to finish her dissertation on art in the marketplace, but instead Cress finds herself drawn into the life of this small community—and into the orbit of Jakey Yates, the owner of the local lodge. When she takes a part-time job with a contractor, she meets the Morrow brothers, and her distractions begin to multiply.

As Cress falls prey to her own perilous reasoning, she strays into dark new territory, where she becomes subject to uncontrollable forces from both within and without. At once sharply observed and utterly enthralling, *Off Course* evokes the pull of an intense, impossible connection and reveals what happens when two people can't let go of one another or their previous commitments.



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### QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Discuss the novel's title. Did Cress drift off course, or was her original course simply a false path? When has your life seemed to veer off course?
2. How does Michelle Huneven use money as a metaphor throughout the novel? What makes the Reagan era an appropriate backdrop for Cress's immersion in economics, with her tightfisted father and indulgent mother, no less? How was Quinn affected by his father's despair over the Noah Mountain debt?
3. Does life in the Meadows ultimately liberate Cress? Would you thrive in a small-town community, or would it feel stifling to you?
4. What makes Jakey so generous? Is he ever truly greedy?
5. How is Sharon's role in the family different from Cress's? Throughout the novel, what shifts occur in the sisters' relationship?

6. How do the carpentry and home building depicted in the novel reflect the lives of the characters? What “new construction” is occurring in Cress’s family, and in Quinn’s?
7. What did Sylvia Hartley’s early days as an actress help her discover about the realities of the world offstage?
8. How is Cress affected by the image of the bear, both the live one outside the A-frame and the bearskin rug she buys in chapter 18, as well as the bear Quinn recalls from his youth? What does the rugged land teach Cress about her own instincts?
9. Discuss the questions of morality raised in the novel. Is Cress a sort of thief, as some accuse her of being? Who endures the greater share of the town’s judgment: Quinn or Cress? How does DeeDee’s relationship with a younger man compare to Quinn’s affair?
10. Would you have said yes to Quinn’s proposal? How does Cress’s situation compare to your most intense experiences in love?
11. How did you react to the outcomes Quinn and Sylvia experienced? To what degree was Cress merely a bystander in their marriage, despite the opinions of Quinn’s mother?
12. Do you agree with the therapist’s assessment in chapter 25 about Cress’s Oedipus-for-girls (Electra) experience? What did it take for Cress to resolve her feelings of emptiness and longing?
13. How does *Off Course* enhance the themes of conscience and fate explored in other novels by Huneven that you have read?

### **About the Author**

**MICHELLE HUNEVEN** is the author of three previous novels—*Blame*, *Jamesland*, and *Round Rock*. Her nonfiction writing includes restaurant reviews and food journalism, as well as *The Tao Gals Guide to Real Estate* with Bernadette Murphy. She has received a General Electric Foundation Award for Younger Writers and a Whiting Writers' Award for fiction. Huneven lives in Altadena, California, with her husband, Jim Potter.

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